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SUBJECT: EU REFERENDUM AS PLEBISCITE ON JACQUES CHIRAC AND
HIS LEADERSHIP

REF: A. (A) PARIS 2604
[1](#)B. (B) PARIS 2516
[1](#)C. (C) PARIS 2205
[1](#)D. (D) PARIS 1649
[1](#)E. (E) PARIS 1230

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SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) France's referendum on a proposed Constitution for the EU could be shaping up into a nationwide vote of no confidence in Chirac and his leadership. Chirac has been President of France since 1995, and may well be aiming to run for a third term. For many voters across the electoral spectrum, Chirac and those around him have come to epitomize the failures of France's elite. The referendum offers a large swath of voters a vehicle to express their alienation from and resentment toward that "political class." For center-left voters, who were "forced" to vote for Chirac in his second round presidential run-off against extreme-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002, the reluctance to "vote for him again" by endorsing Chirac in his support of the EU Constitution is particularly strong. In all, a fusion of anxiety about economic conditions, resistance to specific reform proposals, frustration at ineffective institutions, anger at the political class, and partisan opposition to Chirac and his party are transforming a referendum about a Constitution for Europe into a plebiscite about Jacques Chirac and his leadership. END SUMMARY.

AMALGAM OF MOTIVATIONS

[1](#)2. (SBU) The French electorate is in a particularly sour and anxious mood (reftels B and C). Opponents of the proposed constitution cite a slew of reasons for voting against it, many of which are not related to the constitution, but rather to domestic political concerns. This combination threatens to turn the May 29 referendum on the EU Constitution into a vote of no confidence in Jacques Chirac and his Presidency. Those who plan to vote 'no,' primarily out of domestic political concerns, offer a variety of reasons for doing so. Some oppose specific reform proposals of the government of Chirac's Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin; others' partisan allegiance opposes them to Chirac and his party; still others -- in a way that goes beyond policy disagreement and partisan opposition -- are deeply discontented with Chirac's governance and with what they see as a declining quality of life in France. This tendency cuts across political party lines, grouping elements of mainstream center-right and center-left voters with those further to the right and left, and with those on the extremes subject to the populist, xenophobic current always present on the French political scene.

POPULIST FURY

[1](#)3. (SBU) The discontent that runs across the electorate, on the far right, becomes pure populist resentment against "them." Its focus in connection with the referendum is on Jacques Chirac and the political class, but it quickly widens out to include Brussels technocrats, "pointy-headed intellectuals," immigrants, foreigners, etc. For example, in a TV debate April 13 on the proposed Constitution, Marine le Pen, daughter of Jean-Marie le Pen, leader of the extremist National Front (FN) party, deploying the coded vitriol that is the FN's stock-in-trade, derided both the center-left, and Chirac and the center-right, for supporting the proposed Constitution only because they were interested in "serving the Europe of money."

DISCONTENT ACROSS THE CENTER

[1](#)4. (SBU) At a rally on April 16, Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party President Nicolas Sarkozy summed up the electorate's restive mood saying, "The French feel like turning over the table" (and added, that if they reject the proposed Constitution they "will have turned it over on themselves"). Across the center of the electorate, discontent coalesces around a sense that France's

institutions are not up to the job of addressing the country's economic and social problems and that the political class that presides over these institutions is too complacent and incapable of making effective use of them. The often-heard complaint that the public education system -- which once held pride of place among the civic institutions of The Republic -- "is crumbling," is emblematic of these voters' deep disillusionment. If many center-right and center-left voters, who share this feeling of being let down by their country and its leaders, vote 'no' to express it, the hopes of the 'yes' camp could well be bitterly disappointed May 29.

REJECTION OF THE POLITICAL CLASS

15. (SBU) France's political class, bred in a handful of state "grande ecoles" (like the National School of Administration (ENA) and private, feeder institutions (such as the Institute of Political Studies (Sciences-Po), and then drawn into long political careers, often near the very top of France's governmental institutions, is viewed with suspicion by ordinary people. The "France of below" sees the "France of above" as inaccessible, unaccountable, inbred, and self-serving. The relatively recent practice of "co-habitation" (president and prime minister from opposing parties) has boosted public perception of a single elite, blurring the distinction between left and right. Jacques Chirac, and many of the figures closely associated with him, such as Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin, fit the mold of this elite to a tee. Recently, Finance Minister Herve Gaymard was forced to resign (reftel E), for having rented a luxurious apartment to house himself and his family at state expense. Scandals such as this one confirm popular suspicions that this French nomenclatura is out of touch with the lives of ordinary people. President Chirac's evident incomprehension of young voters' concerns during a long-awaited television appearance April 14 (reftel A) confirmed for many viewers the gulf between elite and public. Those particularly resentful of this class and its privileges, or outraged by its recent excesses, or just disappointed by its aloofness, could well vote 'no' on May 29 to express their displeasure.

AMONG SOCIALISTS -- REMEMBERING MAY 2002

16. (SBU) At Socialist Party (PS) vote-'yes' rallies, National Secretary Francois Hollande and supporters such as mayor of Lille Martine Aubry, hammer away at the theme that "2007 is the time to sanction Chirac and Raffarin." For many center-left voters the prospect of -- again -- supporting Jacques Chirac and the "liberal" center-right is dismaying. Among them, the memory of May 2002 is still fresh; then, in a second-round presidential run-off, they were "forced" to vote for Chirac against right-wing extremist, Jean-Marie le Pen -- and they don't want to hand Chirac another "undeserved" victory. These voters, who are not so much against the Constitution as they are repulsed by the idea of voting again in a way that supports Chirac, are being avidly courted by both Chirac and the PS' pro-'yes' leadership. Focusing these voters on affirming their support for Europe and not their partisan opposition to Chirac and the center-right is key to preventing the referendum from becoming a plebiscite. Current polls, which show 'no' leading among center-left voters by nearly 60 percent, reflect how strongly the 'sanction Chirac' feeling runs on the center-left. That the center-left has already roundly punished Chirac and the center-right in two nationwide elections since 2002 (for Regional Councils and European Parliamentarians both in 2004), is further evidence of the strength and persistence of anti-Chirac feeling.

AGAINST RAFFARIN'S REFORMS

17. (SBU) The nationwide general strike on March 10 (reftel D), led by public sector unions revealed the range and variety of the constituencies opposed to specific reform proposals of the Raffarin government. Employees from the beleaguered public health, public education and public transportation systems, abetted by high school students, farmers groups and clerical and staff employees of some key ministries (including the Foreign Ministry) are intent on voting 'no' in parochial opposition to government reform policies that would affect them.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) Since President Chirac's disappointing TV performance April 14, Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin has emerged -- at Chirac's direction -- as the leading spokesperson of the government's pro-'yes' campaign. In his public statements and debate appearances, Villepin has been insistently sounding the theme that, after the referendum, government domestic policy will be re-energized and re-focused because "we have heard what the French people are telling us." This promise of committed attention to the domestic issues that dominate voter preoccupation is, clearly, an effort to deflect the discontented from their

intention to use the referendum as a vote of no confidence. It remains to be seen if Villepin will be more successful than Chirac and Raffarin have been in pulling voters' attention away from the economic insecurities, political dissatisfactions and social resentments -- that Chirac and the Raffarin government have come to epitomize. Recasting voters' current approach to the referendum -- convincing them to consider the proposed constitution and answer the question asked May 29 -- is key to reclaiming the referendum from the plebiscite on Jacques Chirac and his leadership that it is threatening to become. END COMMENT.
WOLFF